

The New York Times

Sinosphere

Dispatches From China

OCTOBER 17, 2013, 11:39 PM

Amid Heavy Pollution, Beijing Issues Emergency Rules to Protect Citizens

By DID/ KIRSTEN TATLOW

Snappily titled the Six Stops and One Wash, a new and complex string of regulations by the Beijing city government is aimed at combating the effects of persistent, heavy air pollution on the populace. A major rule will take private vehicles off the roads on alternate days, depending on their license plates, when pollution is especially bad.

The new measures were announced Thursday as air in the capital was deemed “heavily polluted,” according to government air quality readings. Air pollution is a chronic problem in large parts of China.

The regulations consist of a system of four colored alerts that will kick in when heavy pollution is forecast.

The World Health Organization’s cancer agency, the International Agency for Research on Cancer, said Thursday that it was classifying air pollution as a Group 1 human carcinogen. Particulate matter, a main component of air pollution, was also being classified as a carcinogen, said the agency, based in Lyon, France. “Our conclusion is that this is a leading environmental cause of cancer deaths,” Christopher P. Wild, the agency’s director, said at a news briefing in Geneva, according to Reuters.

That puts both air pollution and air-suspended particulate matter with more than 100 other known cancer-causing substances in the agency’s Group 1 category, including asbestos, plutonium, silica dust, ultraviolet radiation and tobacco smoke, Reuters reported.

Beijing, along with much of northern China, suffers from consistently heavy air pollution that can be especially bad in the winter, when coal-powered heating systems are widely used.

The plan seems to rest on being able to predict pollution patterns with great accuracy.

When one day of “heavy” pollution, defined as an air quality index reading of 201 to 300, is predicted, a blue alert will be put in place and extra street washing will be carried out. Street washing is intended to hold down the dust that accumulates from things like construction activity and sand from the desert, though some here see it as a mostly cosmetic measure.

A yellow alert applies to one day of “serious” pollution, defined as an index reading of more than 300, and will also lead to extra street washing.

When three days of heavy pollution are predicted, an orange alert will be put in place and more action will be taken: factories will close, work on construction sites will stop, and the use of barbecues and firecrackers will be banned.

A red alert will be put in place when three days of serious pollution are forecast, leading to the full Six Stops and One Wash plan. As well as all the above measures, kindergartens and elementary and high schools will close, and cars will be driven only on alternate days; those with license plates that end in odd numbers can be driven on odd-numbered days, and those with plates ending in even numbers on even-numbered days. Some people can get around this rule, like those lucky enough to have more than one car with the right plates.

Xinhua, the state-run news agency, said this measure will cause about two million more people to squeeze onto public transportation. Extra buses will be deployed, and the subway will run for half an hour longer in the evening, it said.

While the plan has received quite a bit of attention already, with many people sending or forwarding messages with details on Sina Weibo, a Chinese microblog site, its usefulness is already being called into question.

"The target of getting this policy out there is the pollution," said Manpaozhe Robin on Sina Weibo. "So the point is whether the odd and even car rule will solve the air pollution problem. I don't believe this is a good policy. It's a simple and crude measure that leaves the skies still smoggy."

China has also announced a long-term plan to clear the air, but the government has warned it will not be easy or quick.

Another person, with the user name Jihe de dipan, said: "Starting from today, I will use my mobile phone to follow the air pollution index. Even though we are helpless against the serious pollution that worsens day by day, the least I can do is use my goodness and this record to warn my loved ones and friends to protect their health!" On Thursday, the person noted, "The air pollution level is 285."